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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO CORBIN, NEA/I, NEA/IR

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SUBJECT: MEK DEFECTORS ON LIFE IN ASHRAF AND RESETTLEMENT

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Gary A. Grappo for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During a September 17 meeting with Emboffs, several recent defectors from the Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK) organization residing in a Baghdad hotel under GOI auspices expressed frustration and disappointment at the absence of resettlement options and the alleged indifference of Western nations for their welfare as refugees. Many revealed psychological and physical harm experienced at the hands of the MEK and reaffirmed existing perceptions of the MEK as a cult-like organization that thrives on maintaining control of its members and those lured to Ashraf under false pretenses. The defectors were grateful for GOI assistance but urged greater action by the UN and third-countries to relieve them of their state of legal and physical uncertainty in Iraq. They cautioned that failure to do so would discourage other Ashraf residents from defecting. END SUMMARY

Frustrations Mount

¶2. (C) On September 17, Post's Iran Watcher (IW) and Poloff met with MEK defectors currently housed in a modest Baghdad hotel (on GOI expense) to discuss their current situation and the circumstances that led them to Ashraf. There are 21 defectors in Baghdad, among them 20 men and one woman. (NOTE: The woman did not participate in the meeting but is willing to meet separately with Emboffs. The GOI had a representative from Ashraf committee present during the meeting. END NOTE.) Another 22 are in Erbil awaiting UNHCR resettlement. The Baghdad defectors have been residing in a local government-run hotel (2 star equivalent) for the past several months.

¶3. (C) The defectors range in age between 25 and 60. On average, most have spent 10-15 years in Ashraf, either as committed MEK supporters or captives allegedly lured to Ashraf on false pretenses of employment, study abroad, or transit enroute to resettlement in Europe. The defectors confirmed that this was their first encounter with any foreign mission and welcomed future visits.

¶4. (C) Although appreciative of GOI assistance and support, the defectors were all unified in their desire to leave Iraq as soon as possible for resettlement/repatriation in Europe, Iran, the United States or Canada. Many accurately pointed out that their failed resettlement has offered little incentive for other residents to leave Ashraf, fearing similar hopelessness and "purgatory" in Iraqi hotels. Many also expressed disappointment with the U.S. and other Western country for refusing to accept them as refugees. One man questioned why, after renouncing their ties with the MEK, they were still treated as terrorists and refused resettlement, pointing out that even former Guantanamo detainees were being resettled in Europe. Another man asserted that had he known resettlement would be so difficult, he would have remained in Ashraf despite its

hardships.

15. (C) More than one defector expressed disappointment with and loss of trust in the USG for "encouraging us to leave and raising our expectations of assistance." Others expressed concern about the welfare of friends or relatives left behind in Ashraf. In explaining their motivations for leaving Ashraf, nearly all the defectors felt betrayed by the MEK and dismayed by their psychological and physical degradation at the hands of the organization. One man asked for help in retrieving his confiscated papers and other personal documents, including passport and Iranian identification Qdocuments, including passport and Iranian identification cards, from Ashraf.

Preference for Resettlement in the West

16. (C) When asked by IW about their willingness to return to Iran, only four expressed an interest while others voiced a preference "to live in freedom in an open society, preferably in the West." One man said that life in present-day Iran would be too alien for him given the social and political changes following the Iranian revolution. One of the four individuals destined for Iran complained about the ICRC's lack of responsiveness in expediting their return to Iran.

17. (C) In a separate meeting later in the day, ICRC informed IW that four individuals are expected to return to Iran in a week, pending issuance of their Iranian passports and other documentation. (NOTE: The Iranian embassy in Iraq has offered to issue passports for former MEK rank and file willing to

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return to Iran. However, one of the defectors who claimed to be the former head of the MEK's political department told IW that IRIG intelligence officers visit the defectors regularly to solicit their cooperation against the MEK in return for passports and possible resettlement in Europe. The defector explained that collaborators would travel to Turkey on official Iranian passports and then smuggled into Europe on falsified documents. He also dismissed claims by other defectors that they had been lured or trapped in Ashraf under false pretenses, asserting that such claims were only intended to help their resettlement cases. END NOTE.)

Disillusionment with the MEK

18. (C) Many of the defectors alleged psychological and physical harm at the hands of the MEK, including solitary confinement in MEK jails in Ashraf. One man in a wheelchair spoke passionately about how the MEK "crushed our personalities" and threatened to turn them over to the Saddam regime if they refused to join the organization. He and others requested medical assistance for their ailments, citing dissatisfaction with the GOI's medical facilities.

19. (C) IW asked the defectors how long they had resided in Ashraf; their reasons for being there and what prompted their departure. Nearly all said that they had grown disillusioned with the MEK and/or life at Ashraf, and anxious to secure their freedom. Most confirmed that their departure had been facilitated by the GOI's human rights ministry with help from the U.S. military and the Ashraf Refugee Camp (ARC) located next to Ashraf. (NOTE: ARC has since closed due to slow defection rates. END NOTE.) Below is a sampling of their answers:

--Six-year resident; 25 year-old former student; resident since 2003; lured from Iran with promises of study abroad opportunities; no ideological or political sympathies with the MEK.

--Nineteen-year resident, 39 year old former Iranian POW

captured by the Iraqis; MEK confiscated his documents and promised to facilitate his return home or resettlement abroad;

--Nine-year resident; deceived by offers of travel abroad; lured to Ashraf from Turkey with "laissez passer" documents under new name.

--Nine-year resident; former MEK recruiter in Turkey; lured to Ashraf for "consultations" with leadership but imprisoned for questionable loyalty.

--Eighteen-year resident; believed MEK was a political vice terrorist organization; escaped three months ago after several failed attempts. Brother remains in Ashraf and is unable to leave.

--Twenty-year resident; MEK member who was prevented by leadership from leaving but managed to do so with help from GOI and U.S. military.

--Twenty-year resident; self-declared freedom fighter opposed to Iran's theocracy; left MEK after "their lies were revealed"; considers MEK "the most disgusting and devious organization in the world."

--Eight-year resident; deceived with resettlement assistance while in UAE; paid MEK 13,000 USD to facilitate resettlement; found himself trapped in Ashraf.

Comment

¶10. (C) The defectors, although residing in relative comfort, are clearly (and understandably) frustrated with their situation and the lack of closure regarding possible resettlement opportunities. During a subsequent briefing to EU missions and UN reps (UNHCR, UNAMI), IW reiterated the defectors' request for resettlement assistance. UNHCR is equally frustrated at the lack of third-country interest in offering resettlement to those MEK defectors identified as refugees. EU officials, when pressed about their lack of interest, cite domestic legal restrictions against resettlement of former members of a FTO (although the EU has de-listed the MEK as a FTO, many individual EU member-states have separate legal and policy restrictions prohibiting resettlement of former FTO members.) According to UNHCR, some EU states are looking to the U.S. to initiate the resettlement process. SRSG Melkert also believes admissions

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of some MEK refugees will be necessary in order to prod reluctant EU member states.

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